

Pathways Call for Evidence Submission

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12 August 2026

Net Zero Commission NSW

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Dear Commissioners,

Re: Call for evidence - Decarbonisation Pathways for NSW: 2026 Consultation

The Northern Rivers Joint Organisation (NRJO) is the peak regional body for local government in the Northern Rivers, bringing together Ballina Shire, Byron Shire, Kyogle, Lismore City, Richmond Valley and Tweed Shire councils, and Rous County Council as an associate member. NRJO supports intergovernmental cooperation, regional advocacy and coordinated projects that deliver shared benefits for Northern Rivers communities.

The region covers more than 20,700 square kilometres and is home to almost 319,000 people across coastal communities, regional centres, rural villages, productive agricultural land and internationally recognised natural environments. It is highly exposed to floods, bushfires, coastal hazards and infrastructure disruption, making the integration of emissions reduction, resilience, adaptation and regional economic opportunity central to effective decarbonisation pathways.

NRJO's Strategic Regional Priorities 2025–2029 focus on resilience, connection, thriving communities, sustainability and innovation. These priorities align closely with the Commission's Call for Evidence, particularly place-based infrastructure, regional investment barriers, workforce constraints, waste and circular economy opportunities, renewable energy, electrification, community resilience and equitable outcomes for rural, regional and First Nations communities. Through the Joint Organisation Net Zero Acceleration (JONZA) Program, NRJO is supporting councils to build capability, improve emissions data, identify projects and coordinate regional net zero action.

This submission aligns with other regional NSW Joint Organisations participating in JONZA, funded through the NSW Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water's Sustainable Councils Program. The program has shown that dedicated regional capacity, collaboration and shared resources help councils develop emissions reduction strategies, build capability and identify practical net zero projects.

Policies and Market Mechanisms

From the Northern Rivers Joint Organisation perspective, NSW's transition to net zero will be most effective where policy settings recognise regional implementation realities: network constraints, long-term funding needs, workforce shortages, streamlined approvals, local benefit-sharing and place-based investment. The Northern Rivers has strong renewable



energy potential and a demonstrated appetite for community-led climate action, but these opportunities require coordinated support from government, industry and communities to translate ambition into practical projects.

The Northern Rivers is well positioned to contribute to NSW's emissions reduction targets through distributed energy systems, including rooftop solar, community batteries, microgrids and local energy-sharing models. These technologies can improve resilience, reduce emissions and lower energy costs, particularly where they are supported by network upgrades, local procurement, community co-investment and clear pathways for councils and communities to participate.

Regional decarbonisation will also require practical partnerships between local government, industry, energy providers, agriculture and community organisations. Priority opportunities include circular economy initiatives, waste and resource recovery, electrification of transport and industry, on-farm emissions reduction, carbon farming and community-owned renewable energy projects. Programs that support regional collaboration and knowledge sharing should be expanded where they help turn these opportunities into deliverable projects.

However, several barriers are limiting the pace and scale of transition, including electricity network constraints, fragmented short-term funding, workforce shortages and lengthy approval processes. In many parts of the Northern Rivers, network congestion restricts rooftop solar export and new renewable connections. Longer-term place-based funding, targeted skills programs and streamlined approvals would improve investment certainty and support coordinated regional delivery.

State policy could further support regional action through standardised local government carbon accounting, incentives for distributed energy, coordinated EV charging infrastructure, procurement policies for low-emissions products and services, and finance models that aggregate projects, support co-investment and retain benefits in regional communities.

Overall, the Northern Rivers can make a meaningful contribution to NSW's net zero ambitions where State policy enables coordinated regional delivery. Priority actions include electricity network investment, longer-term place-based funding, workforce development, streamlined approvals, private finance mechanisms and community benefit-sharing arrangements that ensure regional communities share in the benefits of renewable energy infrastructure hosted in their area.

Technology and Behaviour Change

Achieving the Northern Rivers' emissions reduction and resilience objectives will require both low-emissions technologies and community-wide behaviour change. The region has strong uptake of rooftop solar, growing interest in batteries and electric vehicles, and opportunities in microgrids, community energy, energy efficiency, sustainable transport, waste reduction and low-emissions agriculture. Further adoption is constrained by charging gaps, grid limitations, upfront costs and workforce capacity, particularly in rural communities.

Waste is a key emissions reduction opportunity. Landfill emissions remain a major greenhouse gas source, particularly where landfills are council-operated. NRJO is supporting a coordinated plan for a regional waste solution, including through the Regional



Residual Waste Steering Committee. This work can reduce landfill reliance, improve organics diversion, increase resource recovery and identify regional infrastructure solutions that deliver emissions reduction at scale.

Solar panels are also an emerging waste stream. The Northern Rivers has high rooftop solar installation rates, and rapid technology change is encouraging some panels to be replaced before the end of their useful life. End-of-life management, reuse, repair and recycling should be included in circular economy and waste infrastructure planning so renewable energy benefits are not undermined by avoidable material waste.

Economic Impacts and Just Transition

The transition to net zero can strengthen and diversify the Northern Rivers economy through renewable energy, energy efficiency, circular economy initiatives, sustainable agriculture, low-emissions transport, land management and environmental services. However, the pace and scale of change must be carefully managed so regional communities, businesses and workers can participate in the benefits and are not disproportionately affected by transition costs, infrastructure constraints, housing pressures or climate-related disruptions.

A just transition must ensure that benefits, opportunities and costs are shared fairly. This is particularly important for rural and regional areas such as the Northern Rivers, where communities face higher service delivery costs, reduced infrastructure access and limited capacity to absorb additional financial burdens, while also being asked to host infrastructure that supports the broader State transition.

Regional and rural communities often host renewable energy generation, transmission and related infrastructure that benefits metropolitan energy users. Where local impacts are not matched by clear local benefits, support can be undermined by a reasonable perception that costs and benefits are unevenly shared. A transparent community-benefit sharing scheme should be embedded in renewable energy planning to provide tangible, locally determined benefits and reduce opposition driven by a not in my back yard response.

Transition planning should also partner with First Nations peoples and support Indigenous-led economic development, cultural land management, ecosystem restoration, carbon farming and renewable energy participation. Programs should strengthen regional workforce pathways, local decision-making, long-term funding access and support for vulnerable households so regional and First Nations communities are active participants and beneficiaries of the transition.

Evidence and Other Considerations

The Northern Rivers provides evidence of both strong community uptake of decarbonisation technologies and the implementation challenges that must be addressed. Rooftop solar adoption is high, but network export constraints reduce the value of that investment and increasing panel replacement creates an emerging end-of-life management issue. Future pathways should consider both the infrastructure needed to support renewable generation and the circular economy systems needed to manage renewable products responsibly.



Pathways to net zero should assess broader outcomes as well as emissions reduction, including regional economic resilience, workforce development, energy affordability, housing costs, land-use impacts, water security and biodiversity. Future pathways should minimise unintended impacts on productive agricultural land, natural ecosystems and regional infrastructure while supporting local economic development and community wellbeing.

Given the Northern Rivers' exposure to floods, bushfires and other climate-related hazards, future pathways should integrate emissions reduction with adaptation and resilience. Distributed energy, efficient buildings, sustainable land management, ecosystem restoration and regional waste solutions can deliver mitigation and resilience benefits together. NRJO encourages a place-based approach that recognises regional differences, supports local decision-making and ensures regional communities share in the benefits of the transition to net zero.

Yours faithfully,



Northern Rivers Joint Organisation

CC: Phillip Rudd, NRJO Executive Officer

